

The White Knight

by Alison Jacobs © 2003

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Chapter One: Arrival

It was almost as if he was two people. He was Ed Straker, commander of SHADO but he was also the White Knight, riding through a medieval England of jewel-like colours. Quite beautiful and quite perplexing. The aliens had tried this sort of thing before, plunging him into a fantasy world. For now it seemed best to go along with it until he could see an exit. He had a vague idea that he was supposed to be on a quest. Perhaps if he completed it he would be free. Or not.

He ambled along on his white charger, taking in the details of the forest. He did not know what might be important. Through gaps in the trees he got an occasional glimpse of a white walled castle straight out of a manuscript illumination. The path seemed to be winding its way in that direction. It seemed as good a place to go as any.

It was getting dark by the time he reached the drawbridge. He could see liveried men-at-arms on the battlements. One called down to challenge him and it was only then that he realised that it was a woman. That surprised him slightly. Women might have equal rights in SHADO... Could he remember women warriors in Mallory?

He looked up, removing his helmet. "I am the White Knight. I seek lodgings."

The woman disappeared and a few minutes later the portcullis was raised. A man clad in rich velvets and satins strode out to meet him.

Alec.

But the recognition was not mutual. "My Lord, welcome to my humble abode. Will you grace us with your presence at table?"

If that was the way it worked, that was the way it worked. He was hungry, he could use a bed for the night and if anywhere in this dream was safe, surely it would be here.

His host, it seemed, was the Lord of the Castle of Ladies. He had to smile at that. There were beautiful girls everywhere clad in long gowns and elaborate headdresses. Looking around, it appeared that the two of them were the only men.

He had bathed and changed into a white velvet gown when the alarm bells sounded. He grabbed his sword and ran out onto the battlements. The women, some clad in armour, were stringing bows and collecting quivers of arrows. Alec was directing operations from the gatehouse. Ed could not see the threat so he ran to join him.

Alec turned to him. "Sir Knight, have you ever slain a dragon?"

That was what it was: a big, green, scaly, heraldic dragon. He was about to ask if it could breathe fire when it incinerated the partially raised drawbridge.

"No, I never have."

"But you are prepared?"

He grimaced. "I think I'd better go and put my armour on."

"As will I."

How do you fight a dragon? he thought as he slipped on his padded under garments. He supposed you stabbed it if you could get close enough but those scales looked tough. Was there any way of sliding the sword between them?

He heard a scream from outside and hurried into the rest of his harness. He got outside in time to see one maiden burned to a crisp and another being snatched over the battlements in the beast's jaws. The woman was screaming pitifully as her fellows loosed off arrows all around her. Most of them just bounced off its hide. The few that stuck seemed to do no damage.

Alec came out of his chamber just ahead of him and they both ran around the walls towards it.

Straker's stomach turned over as the dragon swallowed the girl whole. It immediately sought another victim. He tried to get a good look as it weaved about. The only spots that appeared vaguely vulnerable were the throat or where the wings joined the body. Or the eyes.

A plan forming, he quickly spoke to Alec. In many ways, Freeman's was the most dangerous part but as expected, he accepted it enthusiastically. They had to bring the dragon's head low enough.

Alec cleared the women from that section and stood alone, shouting at the beast and brandishing his sword. It looked at him curiously, almost as if it was weighing him up. A very tempting target but it did not seem entirely convinced. The reason why occurred to both men at almost the same moment. Straker was horrified as his friend started to remove his armour.

It worked almost too well. As he unbuckled his breast plate, the dragon lunged like a diving hawk. Straker had barely a second to jump for its head and hang on.

With one hand he grabbed at the ridge of spines that ran down its neck. His arm was almost wrenched from its socket and the armour was unbearably heavy. He had to get a better grip. He had no time to see what was happening to Alec. The only thing in his favour was that it did not seem to have noticed him yet.

He swung himself round, catching another spine with his other hand. The mailed gauntlets did not make for a good grip. He steadied himself, then pulled himself up until he was sitting on the neck. So far the plan was working.

It felt like the whole world was in motion as the dragon tried to catch the elusive Alec. Straker worked his way up one spine at a time until he reached the base of the skull. Now there was very little to hang onto but he just had to make it as far as the eyes.

The head reared. He had been noticed. He clung on for dear life as it took him up and down, side to side, like a sickening roller-coaster ride. He only hoped it did not take off. But it had a worse idea in mind. Dropping, it tried to scrape him off against the walls.

He had to get to the eyes. He had to get it over with. The only thing he could hold on to was the side of the dragon's mouth. He slid his way forward, grabbed the leathery lips and unsheathed his sword.

He swung half round and stabbed it into the centre of the great, green eye.

The roar of pain nearly blew him away. The dragon bucked and writhed. He felt himself slipping, the sword coming away from the eye. Still the beast did not die. He had obviously not got through to the brain.

As it quieted a little, a thought occurred to him. He looked around for Alec, who it seemed had read his mind. Or at least observed the situation. He was standing waving his lance at him. It was exactly what he needed.

But how did he deliver it? It was too long to swing round like he had the sword. Not unless he was sitting on the beast's nostrils. Where the fire came out.

That was going to have to be it. He could hardly expect it to dive straight onto the lance.

He pushed himself forward again until his legs were wrapped around one of the bulbous nostrils and his left-hand was clamped onto the other. There was no way this was going to work but as the head dipped towards Alec he grabbed the lance from him. He half turned and, with all his weight behind it, he thrust it into the other eye. It slid in smoothly.

The head dropped like a stone. He was lucky to be thrown on to the battlements rather than down to the moat. He landed with a crash and bounced. His armour and padding took

most of the shock but it still left him breathless and bruised.

Two of the women helped him up. He hobbled across to where Alec was standing and looked over to the dragon. Its muscles were giving a few last twitches but there was no doubt it was dead.

"A fine day's work." Alec said.

He nodded. "We did well."

He went back to his chamber to bathe and change back into his robe. He could smell dinner cooking and he was more than ready for it.

The Great Hall was full of colour, banners and tapestries and the ladies' swirling dresses. The food was good, though it tended very heavily towards meat. Roast, stewed or baked in a pie, there was every kind of meat he could think of.

The Lord of the Castle questioned him about himself and he decided to give an account as near the truth as a medieval knight could handle. When he finished, his host nodded deeply.

"You are at war with the Silent Ones."

"Silent Ones?"

"The Green People, though some call them the Red for that is the colour they wear."

"Sounds like them. You know them?"

His host passed him another dish of venison. "They sent the dragon, I'm sure of it. They have many enemies here. The King of the Merfolk, for instance. They stole his sister's heart. Literally."

That sounded awfully familiar.

"Don't worry," Alec continued "if you seek to protect your land from the Silent Ones there are many who will be glad to assist you. Tonight we feast, tomorrow we hold solemn service for those who have died and then I will ride out with you to those who would be your allies."

"That's very good of you." Straker thought for a moment. "And how do we ride out if the drawbridge is in cinders?"

"You'll see. Are you sure you won't have any wine?"

The feasting continued late into the night. Straker was glad to eventually get to bed. He wondered what would happen on the morrow, wondered where this fantasy would take him. Eventually he fell into a deep sleep and dreamt of SHADO HQ.

Chapter Two: The Lady In The Lake

Straker slept well that night and was woken by the first rays of dawn coming through his chamber window. He was still there, still in the fantasy world. While he had a breathing space, he tried to remember how he had got there but it was no use. Nothing would come to him.

A few minutes later there was a knock on the door. One of the maidens brought him a hot drink, another brought water for washing. A third laid out his clothes. They waited outside as he dressed, then conducted him down to the main hall for breakfast.

Alec was already tucking in to what looked like a Cornish pasty. "Ah, Sir Knight, how did you rest?"

"Fine, thank you. But I'm eager to get on with the day's business." Straker helped himself to some of the pastries on the table.

"Of course you are but one cannot start the day without properly breaking one's fast. Then we must bury the dead."

Straker nodded. He agreed with paying proper respect if at all possible. "Then I can get on with my quest?"

"Immediately. If you arm yourself beforehand, we will not have to return to the castle."

So Straker did, once he had finished eating. He met Alec by the stables. He had not realised how many horses they held when he left his own charger there the night before. Nor had he realised what was odd about the beasts until a stablegirl led one out.

They had wings. Gull wings. He almost groaned at the lunacy of it.

If this is going on in my head, he thought, I need a prompt appointment with Dr Jackson.

Nevertheless, he mounted. The saddles had been adapted slightly to accommodate the wings but they were hardly larger than those of a real bird. It was impossible that such a creature could fly but in a world where dragons attacked castles, he had no doubt that they would.

He and Alec, both fully armoured, led the procession on their bronze coloured steeds. The others followed them as they soared over the walls, with six black mares carrying each catafalque. As they passed the dragon, he could see that someone had slit its belly open to retrieve the second corpse. A dangerous job as the build up of gases made them liable to explode.

Now how on earth do I know that?

The ceremony at the little chapel in the woods was simple and brief but moving. Those girls could so easily have been SHADO. Perhaps they were. He was almost glad to get it over with.

Afterwards, Alec gave a few last instructions to his chatelaine before the women set off back to the castle. Then he turned to Straker.

"Are you ready to fulfil your destiny?"

Straker, however, had already thought of something. "My weapons are still in the dragon. I need to retrieve them."

They backtracked to the enormous carcass. Straker tried to gauge how long it was but the contortions of the body made that impossible. He gave up and headed for the eyes. He was not looking forward to withdrawing the sword and lance but it needed to be done.

He gripped the projecting hilt of the sword and pulled it out easily - which was not surprising, because only a couple of inches of rusty metal remained of the blade. The rest had been corroded away. The lance was in a similar condition.

He groaned with frustration, then turned to a thoughtful looking Alec. "I hate to impose but -"

His host had a hand to the chin of his helmet. "I believe the best thing to do is to postpone visiting the merfolk and detour first to the Lady in the Lake. She has magical weapons, the best in the kingdom, for those who are worthy."

Which gave Straker a good idea of who he would be seeing next. However, if Colonel Lake was as competent here as she was in the real world, that would not be a problem.

They rode on along the woodland trails. Flying was quicker but it exhausted the horses much sooner and was more likely to draw attention. He found his mount responded easily to his slightest command. Alec maintained a run of small talk but they both kept a wary eye on the dark, encompassing forest. If dragons were real, what else might be?

In the end, after two or three hours riding they safely reached a large lake ringed by hills. Straker looked across the calm, blue surface and wondered how they should approach. There were no buildings around the water's edge but if he looked carefully he could just catch a glimpse of what looked like a palace obscured by currents deep within the lake.

He heard a bell ringing and glanced round. The bell was hanging from the branch of a tree and Alec was swinging the silken rope attached to the clapper.

"She may come or she may not." he said mildly. "If she judges us worthy we will be rewarded."

But already Straker could hear the waters bubbling. He turned to see a mass of white foam appear in the very centre of the lake. Through the middle rose a figure clad in a long blue-green robe, who glided swiftly but serenely towards them. Virginia Lake, as he had expected.

Alec bowed as she stepped ashore and Straker followed suit.

She curtsied in return. "My Lords, I have the weapons you require prepared. Please, follow me to my abode."

She took each of them by the hand. Reluctantly they stepped onto the water. However once they set off, leaving the horses to wait for them, they moved with such smoothness it was hard to feel that this was an unnatural mode of transport. *No worse than flying, I suppose*, Straker thought. The Lady smiled at them reassuringly and they dropped vertically through the waters. By the time they had recovered enough to protest, they were ensconced within a bubble of air at the gateway to the magnificent marble castle.

The great bronze doors stood open. Straker took a step towards them but instead, she led them towards a little, rickety, wooden door at the base of the wall. All three of them had to bend down to enter.

Inside, the room was twice the size of Alec's Great Hall and stuffed to overflowing with curious substances and equipment halfway between science and magic. *An alchemist's cell*, Straker thought, *but on a very grand scale*. There was even the obligatory stuffed crocodile hanging from the vaulted roof.

Alec was also looking around in awe. It was obvious he had never been here before.

"You are privileged." he whispered to Straker. "She must see a great destiny for you."

"Indeed I do." She was winding through close packed tables and benches towards a large cupboard against the far wall.

The two knights followed her. Straker was certainly curious to see what she would produce. He supposed an automatic or a grenade launcher was too much to hope for.

They eventually made it across. The number of pots and cauldrons scattered about the

floor made it difficult to open the doors of the cupboard. It had a lattice front but he could not see into the darkness behind.

With a little help she got the doors open. Still he could see only darkness. He wondered how far back it went. In fact, she only reached in a short way - her hand disappearing as it went.

The first thing she pulled out was a lance, very long and painted white with a black, geometric pattern around the handle.

"Nothing special about this, I'm afraid." she said. "Good quality but not magical."

She handed it to him and turned away before he could say anything. When she turned back, she was holding a sword. The sight of it took his breath away. The blade seemed made of solid light and a massive diamond glowed from the pommel.

Alec, too, whistled with admiration. "Does it have a name, my lady?"

"It's name is Shadow." she said solemnly.

"A strange name for a sword composed of light."

But Straker knew that it could not have been called anything else. As he took it, he felt a surge of power run up his arm. It moved easily in his hand. It was his, it was part of his being.

He was startled to realise the others were watching him with solemn smiles. He cleared his throat, a little embarrassed that he had been so wrapped up in the gift.

"Thank you. I -"

"Do not thank me." she said. "The sword is not my gift, it is yours already."

He nodded. He knew it was true.

She continued. "You had better go now. If you wish to test the weapons, ride west."

Straker blinked and found himself back on the shore, Alec with him. The horses were grazing peacefully: one on the grass, the other halfway up a tree. They recovered them and mounted.

"West?" asked Alec.

"Why not?"

Chapter Three: The Purple Knight

The two knights rode west through the forest until they reached a shallow river crossing. The challenge that the Lady of the Lake had suggested was immediately apparent. On the far side of the water sat a mounted knight, lance at the ready. His armour and all his trappings were a distinctive shade of purple. Distinctive enough for Straker to raise his eyebrows as he lowered his visor.

The purple knight spoke first. "My Lords, I have taken a vow to joust with any knight who would cross this river. Will you oblige me, sirs, or will you turn and flee as recreant knaves?"

The voice was muffled by the helmet but Straker was fairly sure he recognised it. If that was the case, he needed to go gently but he could not afford to back down.

He replied lightly: "Sir, I have a new lance that needs testing. I will oblige you. Where is the most suitable piece of ground or would you prefer to do this in the air? "

He checked to see if the purple knight's horse was winged. It was. The knight, however, indicated a clear patch of ground a little way behind Straker.

"That should serve our purposes."

He rode through the shallow water to meet them.

Straker turned to Alec. "Any advice?"

"Do you need it? These young bachelors have no purpose. Perhaps, once you have vanquished him, you can recruit him to our cause."

"I was thinking exactly that. Wouldn't be the first time."

He took up position at one end of the conveniently shaped clearing. He could feel the part of him that was the white knight taking over. He moved without thought or effort, gripping his lance correctly as he held it across his body. His opponent was ready. Alec was acting as marshal. He raised a branch, then dropped it.

At the lightest touch of the spur, Straker's mount thundered forwards. The combatants closed at high speed. Straker braced himself.

The shock nearly knocked him out of his seat as his lance impacted on the purple shield. The purple lance glanced off his own. His opponent swayed in the saddle but recovered.

Straker reigned the horse in, rapidly decelerating. He stopped just before the trees. He brought the horse around.

"A second pass?" he called.

The purple knight raised his lance then lowered it into position. A second pass. Straker steadied himself and his mount, then indicated to the marshal he was ready.

Again the branch was raised, again dropped. Again the exhilaration as the warhorses galloped forwards.

Straker took aim.

The impact rocked him back in his saddle, nearly sent him flying. Again he reigned in. Again he turned.

And was amazed to see the purple knight sprawled on the grass. He sent his horse trotting towards him, dismounting as the man struggled to his feet. Straker drew his sword, Shadow. It glowed in the shade of the trees. "Do you wish to continue?"

The purple knight shook his head. "You have bested me. You are the greater knight and I am released from my vow."

"Then show me your face."

The knight raised his visor and Straker nodded to himself. It was Paul Foster.

"Sir Knight, my companion and I are on a quest to defeat the Silent Ones. Will you join us?"

The answer was an enthusiastic "Verily."

They continued west towards the coast, Alec guiding them through the forest. The trees were closer packed here - tall, dark pines mixed with blasted, shrunken broadleaves. The air grew colder.

A man was sitting on a tree stump, head in hands. He did not stir as they rode up to him. It was only at the last moment that Straker recognised the ragged figure as Keith Ford.

As they were upon him he shot to his feet, looking around warily. "Sir knights, good day to you. Are you here to restore me?"

"Restore you?" Alec asked. "We will if your cause is honourable but what is your complaint? Who has wronged you?"

The man sighed deeply. "I am the Keeper of the Ford -"

"Ford?" Straker queried, wincing at the pun. "The one we just passed?"

"No, my Lord, the one yet to come. I have kept it safe and speeded traffic for many years until I was ousted from my post by a fearsome troll."

It was only now that Straker saw that he was injured. There was a rough bandage around his arm and many of the tears in his clothes seemed more like claw marks than ordinary wear and tear. The man had put up a fight, albeit a rather one-sided one. Ford was certainly not a warrior in the real world, he was a technician. (The thought of a real world other than this one seemed worryingly peculiar to Straker.) By his costume, it seemed he was also a non-combatant here. What exactly the duties of a ford keeper were Straker did not know.

The best thing to do was to head for the river and size up the situation. How big was a troll? Tree sized? Rock sized? Man sized? What kind of weaponry did it carry? What kind of natural defences? From his childhood reading, Straker seemed to remember them as ugly, old and inclined to gobble people up - especially billy goats. Was that it? Or was it something more like Grendel in Beowulf?

You slew a dragon, he told himself. You can handle this. Besides, you have Foster on board now.

Freeman, Foster and Ford. He seemed to be gradually reassembling SHADO.

It became ever more cold and dark as they approached the river, as if the troll was poisoning the atmosphere.

Ford shivered miserably. "My beautiful home."

Alec shook his head sadly. "Such creatures grow more common since the Silent Ones appeared. It is said they can even turn good men to their purposes."

That was true enough of the aliens.

They turned a corner and at the end of the path Straker could see the river crossing. "What do I do now?" he asked. "Just ride up and he'll challenge me?"

Ford nodded apprehensively.

"Fine. You three stay here while I find out what's going on. Anything happens to me - well, you know what to do."

Alec tried protest but Straker was already riding forward. He looked this way and that, trying to spot the monster. There was no sign of it. All he could see was the entrance gate of what looked to be a fine manor house. Did Ford live there?

Then a rock moved. A boulder scuttled across the ground on the far bank. He focused on

it. Grey and rugged, he could see powerful arms and legs. It turned its craggy face towards him, heavy eyebrows lowering.

Straker pulled up short.

It was Henderson.

Chapter Four: The Maidens of the Moon

A troll. Straker looked the creature up and down. It was definitely Henderson. He did not know quite how to deal with it.

He urged his horse forward a few paces and called out. "Can you hear me? We need to cross this river. Do you have a problem with that?"

The troll grunted but made no other response.

Straker stayed where he was, waiting. Nothing. He urged his horse on but it whinnied and was not keen on moving. He could hardly blame it, the rocky caricature of a man that stood across the water was disturbing. Nevertheless, they needed to go forward and he could see no point in delay. He touched his spurs lightly to the horse's side. Reluctantly the steed took a few steps. He encouraged it to do more.

The troll allowed him to ride halfway across the small river. He did not move, except for his eyes which remained fixed on the knight. Straker, and the horse, were growing more confident.

They were nearing the far bank when the horse's hoof slipped on a pebble. The animal staggered and righted itself.

In that moment the troll was upon them, faster than any stone thing should move. Its claws closed around Straker's leg, unable to do damage because of his armour but threatening to pull him from the saddle.

The knight hit out with one iron clad arm, catching the troll under the chin. It stumbled back a pace but was immediately on him again. It hooked its claws through his sword belt.

Straker dropped his lance - useless at close quarters - and drew Shadow before the creature could lay hands on it.

The blade flashed in the gloom.

The troll quailed.

"Don't make me do this." Straker said, all too aware of his ex friend's face under the rock-like features.

He could hear trotting hooves behind him. He doubted the others would show mercy. He knew that he was taking a big risk, yet he could not help it.

"What do you want?" croaked the troll.

Straker lowered his sword, surprised. He had not expected the creature to speak. Now he would have to think carefully about his reply.

He called over his shoulder, not taking his eyes off the creature: "Ford?"

"Here, sire." the man replied.

"What has this... thing taken from you? What do you want in return?"

He could hear the man splashing through the water. "He has taken my position and my house. I do not know what else."

"Nothing else." grunted the troll.

"He has killed many travellers." Ford added.

That was serious. Straker was in two minds, more than two.

He asked the creature: "Were you ever... someone else? Are you under some kind of a curse?"

The troll nodded reluctantly. "Don't ask me to break it, I like the way I am."

Straker took a deep breath. "Break it. That's your penance. Break the curse and be restored." He put Shadow to the creature's neck. "And if I hear you've done otherwise, I'll kill

you."

The troll growled at him, baring its teeth. Then it turned and lumbered downstream, the mark of the magic sword clearly visible on its neck.

The white knight breathed a profound sigh of relief. He turned to find the others all watching him. Did they think he had done the right thing? He was not sure himself. The troll might still wreak havoc elsewhere or return here. Nevertheless, it was Henderson and perhaps, perhaps he could be restored.

Ford conducted them to his official mansion, grateful to be returning home. Already, as the setting sun blazed through the trees, the forest seemed to be regenerating. A bird was singing in the distance. A moment later it has joined by a choir of others. Fresh leaves seemed to be budding on the trees and there were flowers among the grass that Straker could swear had not been there before.

Ford's house was comfortable, a fortified manor rather than a castle. The floors were strewn with sweet herbs and the bright tapestries on the walls showed scenes of merry-making along the river banks and among the mer-people. That reminded Straker that they had still not reached Peter Carlin.

Fires were blazing in the grates and the smell of cooking wafted towards them. Either the troll liked to eat well - and in that case he did not want to know what was being roasted - or else someone had been expecting them.

Straker was tired and, by the lack of conversation, he guessed the others were too. Ford had business to attend to now he had his job back but he saw to it to that they were all well fed.

"Just a simple supper." he told them but it was almost as elaborate as dinner at Alec's castle the night before. Whatever else Straker could say about this world, there was no doubt that he was being well-fed.

Oddly, he saw no servants. Fires and torches were lit, food was laid out on tables, hot water was provided for washing but there was no one about to provide it. Perhaps it was magic, perhaps they were simply discreet. He was too tired to care.

Ford showed each of them to a high-ceilinged bed chamber. Straker unbuckled his armour, washed in the water provided and settled himself gratefully under the covers.

Was that tapestry really depicting his fight with the dragon? Surely that had only been yesterday...

* * *

He awoke to find the chamber illuminated by moonlight from the open window. He could hear merry laughter from outside and conversation. Once or twice he heard the shrill cry of a hawk.

There was no way he could lie in bed, he had to see what was going on out there. The casement was too high to look out of so he pulled on a fur trimmed robe and made for the door.

In the hallway he found Paul and Alec on their way out.

"Do you know what's going on?" he asked.

Alec smiled. "I think some friends of mine have come visiting. Perhaps they are also friends of our host. Their watchful eyes guard many people."

Straker had no idea what the second part of that statement meant but the first seemed to be the case. In the formal rose garden Keith Ford was laughing and joking with a dozen young women. Each wore a long, silver gown that flowed as if it was made of mercury. Each had

floor-length purple hair that floated in the moonlight. And each, on their right wrist, carried a hunting hawk with silver trappings.

"They say their hawks are enchanted men." Alec whispered.

"Their eyes would enchant any man." Paul replied.

Straker was thinking that in some way he could not fathom, the dark feathered hawk that Gay Ellis carried did remind him of Mark Bradley. The other birds did suggest other interceptor pilots.

He shook his head. Knights and trolls were bad enough, human hawks were too much to cope with.

The women turned to them and Gay took a step forward. She really did look lovely - as did Nina, Joan and the others behind them.

She smiled kindly at him and spoke. "Sir Knight, we are the Maidens of the Moon. We have come to dance with you."

As the others began to tread a formal measure to music that had sprung up on the wind, she held out her hand to Straker. He touched her and was drawn into the dance.

Chapter Five: The Enchanter's Castle

Commander Straker awoke the next morning in the guest chamber of the Keeper of the Ford's mansion, unsure whether the events of the night before had been real or simply a dream. Had he really spent the entire night dancing with the Maidens of the Moon? He felt far too refreshed for that. And had they really floated off into the sky at Moonset? But he had a clear memory of Gay's words.

"If you can see the Moon, we can see you. We will know when you need us."

He went down to breakfast feeling relaxed but slightly confused. Paul looked in the same state but Alec was smiling happily, though slightly wistfully.

"They never stay for long. There are as elusive as their own moonbeams."

So maybe it had happened.

Straker reminded himself that he was the Commander of SHADO and not the white knight and that none of this was happening - probably. He had no explanation so he was simply going to ignore that for the moment.

After another hearty meal, the three knights set out. This time they turned more towards the North than the West. With luck they would reach the coast that day. Then, perhaps, they could locate the King of the Merfolk. Alec seemed to be on good terms with all these strange people.

Ford had begged them to stay and enjoy the delights of his house a little longer but Straker had insisted that there was work to be done. That reminded him that he had no real idea what that work was and it was this that he pondered as they rode along. Was there some reason for him to be in this fantasy world? Most likely he was unconscious at the Mayland, responding to fever or drugs in his system.

There was a crack of thunder in the clear blue sky. Lightning struck the very centre of the broad clearing before them. One moment there was a swathe of grass hundreds of yards across, the next a huge castle the size of Windsor and they were standing at its drawbridge.

"Most fearsome magic." Alec commented.

"Fearsome indeed." agreed Paul.

A figure was walking towards them across the moat. Not the drawbridge, the moat. Straker raised an eyebrow at that. The man wore the elaborately embroidered, high collared robes of a wizard and carried a long ebony staff topped with a crystal ball. The skull like face and disturbing eyes were those of Dr Jackson.

"Welcome to my castle. There are great boons here for those that are worthy. Please, enter."

"Across the bridge?" Straker asked mildly.

"If you prefer."

Was that amusement in his face?

Straker hesitated a moment. The others were clearly unsure about this latest encounter. On the other hand, he had always found Jackson to be valuable. Unorthodox, perhaps even unreliable but valuable.

He nodded - "Thank you." - and rode through the entrance, Freeman and Foster following behind.

Night seemed to fall suddenly. Surely that was wrong? Surely it was only a few hours since...

It was night. What did it matter?

The interior of the castle was crammed full of buildings of all sizes, shapes and textures. There seemed no plan to the place. Jackson was in front of him, gesturing him towards a small doorway in a solid wall. The door opened and somehow Straker and his mount passed through it.

"Everything that happens is caused by you."

It was Jackson's voice but Jackson was not visible nor was anyone else. Not even the horse.

Straker was in a monk's cell, tiny and windowless. Fear coursed through him but he suppressed it. This was just an illusion. An illusion of being trapped. There was a pallet bed with a straw mattress and no blanket, a rickety chair and a small table that carried a lit candle, a bowl of water and half a loaf of bread.

He turned round. There was a door behind him. He suspected it was locked but he tried it anyway.

It opened onto a corridor which was long and narrow. There was another door at the far end. He could either go to sleep - and he did feel sleepy - or set off towards it. He started walking.

And walking.

And walking.

The corridor was obviously growing but when he glanced over his shoulder he found that he had come more than halfway. Not infinite, then, just off putting.

He reached the far door and opened it. A blast of flame singed his hair.

He jumped back but left the door open. He needed to know where the flame was coming from, there was no other way out.

He waited a few seconds then tried again. Nothing happened.

The next room was a dark, narrow, high hall. Jackson was sitting on a throne at the far end, dwarfed by the piece of furniture.

Straker walked towards him. "What's all this about?"

"This is nothing."

"I know that."

"Do you?"

"You always were an annoying conversationalist."

Silence.

Straker reached the foot of the throne and began to climb the steps. "What's going on? What is this for? What does it mean?"

Jackson looked at him. "Everything that happens here is caused by you."

"You said that already."

"Go to sleep."

Straker was back in the cell, lying on the bed. It was not very comfortable. He got up and checked the door. This time it was locked and he had no suitable tools with which to unlock it. He went back to the bed to see what happened.

He was not sure if he was awake or sleeping but the same voice came time and again.

"Who are you?"

"What are you doing?"

"Killer."

"What have you done?"

"Fraud."

"Iceman."

It seemed to be Jackson's voice but as he considered, perhaps it was his own.

Who am I?

What am I doing?

I caused this.

He was not sure how he knew it was morning with no window in the cell to show him the time. He got up, opened the door and walked towards the throne room.

The place was full, everyone he ever knew seemed to be there: Alec, Paul, Mary, friends from college. Everyone. They were dancing, talking, ignoring him.

Jackson was beside him. "You have power over all these people. What will you do with them?"

"Do with them?" Straker was surprised. The way Jackson said it made it sound as if he meant Straker to use them. "I don't want to do anything with them."

"As you wish."

As Jackson spoke, the dancers stopped. Stopped stone still, not even breathing.

Straker frowned. "What have you done? What's wrong with them? Are they real?"

Jackson smiled blandly. "I? I have done nothing. And you -"

"Said I don't want to do anything with them. Don't tell me I have to direct their every move?"

"And what would you do with them if you did?"

"And why do you always answer a question with a question?"

Straker looked around the room. Bright colours and no movement and all, all in his power.

He felt physically sick .

Chapter Six: Breaking The Spell

The White Knight, Ed Straker, stood in the hall of the enchanter's castle and tried to work out exactly what kind of spell held the figures motionless around him. He suspected they were simply illusions but he dared not take the risk of treating them as such. If they were real, he had to free them.

According to Jackson, he had complete power over them so he ought to be able to march them out of the building. With any luck, that should put them beyond the enchanter's power. He concentrated on the nearest figure, Miss Ealand. She wore a flowing white gown and high head-dress and was poised in mid-step, so he thought her through lowering her foot.

It worked, in a somewhat jerky fashion. Then he slowly swivelled her towards the door. It had the desired effect but it was too slow. Did he have to take her through every stage of the process?

He thought *Take three steps* and she did. Better. He instructed her to walk to the door and she wove her way in and out of the other dancers until she reached her objective. Then she stopped, waiting for further commands.

He left her where she was for the moment. The next experiment was to see if he could control a group. He thought and every single person in the room turned to face the door. Every person except the enchanter and himself.

But this was not what he had wanted. How did he released them from the spell without taking them over himself? How did he give them back their autonomy? If they were, indeed, real people.

He turned Jackson. "I want to get out of here. I want to get my companions out of here." He looked across to the figures of Alec and Paul. "How do I do that?"

Jackson made an expansive gesture. "You can walk out and take them with you."

"How do I do it without becoming a dictator?"

"Aren't you one?"

"No."

"Don't you want to be? For their own good, of course. For the universal good."

Wasn't that what it came down to? How many times had he taken decisions for people, for their good or someone else's?

Of course he did not want things to degenerate into anarchy. Someone had to take the lead and he had never had any problem doing that.

But it was all so that the aliens would not gain control.

And he was not entirely sure whether that absolved him of responsibility.

He looked around the room. He looked at all the people, all his people.

"I grant you your freedom."

And all around him the people crumbled into dust.

Which was not exactly what he had wanted or expected.

"What are you going to do now?" asked Jackson, just before he too disintegrated.

Straker had not been prepared for that but he was less surprised when a shower of dust fell from the ceiling. The whole place was breaking up, streams of debris converting to ever smaller particles and clogging his lungs.

He had two choices: he could stay still in the hope that it would dissolve around him and risk being suffocated, perhaps even buried, or he could try and find his way out. He took the active course.

He barged through the doorway, the remains of Miss Ealand swirling around his feet. The walls of the corridor were blurring as he ran past. This seemed to be leading to an exit, not his cell. He turned corner after corner, coughing and choking. Breathing was hard. His head felt like it was full of dust. He was beginning to wonder if this was an endless maze.

Only the maze was ending, grey stone walls turning to grey piles of dust. He was wading through dust.

He thought there was a glimpse of sky above him. There was a dead end in front. He pushed through it and found himself in the courtyard opposite the portcullis and bridge.

He ran on, able to breathe more freely now he was in the open-air. As his feet hit the bridge he could feel it shake. It was falling apart under him. It seemed like a long way across the water and he could not move as fast as he needed to in his armour. If he hit the water, the metal would drag him down.

Only, he hadn't been wearing his armour a moment ago, had he?

His horse was standing on the far bank. It raised its head from the grass as it heard him coming. It did not seem unduly disturbed.

A few more feet of bridge to go. There were gaps between the beams. Fragments were dropping into the water. There was nowhere to put his feet.

He hit grass.

He had made it.

He stopped. He took a deep, unclouded breath. Then he turned to watch the final disintegration of the castle.

And there it stood, whole and complete as when he had first seen it.

That made him pause. Should he go back? Were Alec and Paul still in there?

He had a partial answer to the second question. Alec was haring across the bridge, half his armour missing and his face red. As he reached the bank, he dropped to the ground.

Chapter Seven: The Rescue

Ed and Alec both took a moment to get their breath back. Alec looked worse than Ed felt, tired and confused.

"What happened to you?" Ed asked eventually.

"I am not sure. I thought I had found paradise but it seems it was a foretaste of hell."

"That bad?"

"And my own weakness led me there."

Straker nodded. It seemed that the enchanter had found something in him, too... But they had to get organised. He kept watching the bridge but there was no sign of Paul. It seemed - he shivered at the thought - that they would have to go back in.

He quickly gave Alec a run-down of what had happened to him since they were split up.

"A powerful seduction, and complex." said Alec. "Mine was more simple and more sordid."

"Girls?"

Alec leaned back against a tree. "In part. After you crossed the bridge it seemed that you rode through a wall. Such sorcery alarmed me and I attempted to lay hands upon the enchanter."

"He slipped through your grasp?"

Alec shook his head. "I slipped into his. I found myself in a wretched dungeon."

Ed recognised the next part of the story but when Alec emerged from the cell what he found was somewhat different. Again it was a party but a party in full swing. Perhaps *orgy* would be a better word. Alec had always enjoyed life's pleasures but the chance to indulge all sensual passions to the full, with no price to pay...

But there was a price, of course.

He was sparing with details, shaking his head with shame. "I forgot myself. I forgot our quest. I turned away from the dangers that a man must face and immersed myself in gluttony, drunkenness and luxury. I was no more than a beast."

Ed assumed he was using luxury in the medieval, sexual sense but the modern meaning would sit pretty well. Alec was sitting with his head in his hands, slumped in misery. Ed needed to get him out of it so that they could get on but also because he could not bear to see his friend like that.

Hesitantly, he put a hand out to him. "How did you get out of there?"

"The enchanter overstepped himself. There was a girl. She was too young, too vulnerable. The mob wanted me to..." He shivered in disgust. "I had no weapon with which to defend her so I took her hand and fled. I should have slain those monsters."

Ed placed the hand on Alec's shoulder. "There was nothing else you could do. Besides, I doubt they were real. No more than a figment of the enchanter's imagination. So you found your way out but she was no longer with you?"

Alec nodded.

Ed paused for a moment. "I wonder... It's almost as if we were given a get-out clause. Not that that matters now. I'm guessing our friend the Purple Knight hasn't found his. How do we go about retrieving him?"

Alec shrugged. "We go and look for him?"

It was a frightening thought but moments later they were both on their feet and headed towards the bridge. They had no defence against the enchanter except their own strength of

will and they had very little idea of what to do. How did you find anyone when the castle might instantaneously transport you to another part of itself?

But it seemed for the moment that the castle was co-operating. There was no sign of its owner but when they stepped through the first door they came to, they found themselves once more in the hall.

There was no party now, no dancing although the room was full of people and there was music: a constant, complex fanfare. It came from a phalanx of trumpeters either side of the ornate throne. On the throne, crowned and clad in white armour, was Paul Foster. He was waving with gracious smugness to the people .

"Idiot." Straker hissed.

Alec was angry. "He has usurped your throne."

"He's welcome to it. Except it'll kill him. We have to get him off there."

"But how?"

He *could* walk up to him and confront him, call him a usurper. He might capitulate, go back to the allegiance he had sworn. Or it might get his back up and cause him to fight.

Or... if he had fallen to one temptation, perhaps he might fall to a better one.

Straker whispered the plan to Alec. "I'd ask one of these... creatures to do it but I'm not sure we can trust them or even that they'd understand."

Alec nodded. "I'll do it. Though to call him 'your Majesty' sticks in my gullet."

"Never mind. If it gets him out of here, that's all that matters. I'll wait by the door. It's best if he doesn't see me."

He withdrew to the back, watching as Alec began to thrust his way through the crowd. He pushed his way to the front, ignoring everyone except the enthroned figure.

"Your Majesty, your Majesty, I cry you aid. My castle is besieged and you alone may save us."

To his credit, Paul was on his feet immediately, brandishing his sword. "I shall deliver you from your foes."

He raced out, barely giving Alec time to follow him. Ed stood in the shadows, holding the door open. Paul and Alec ran out. Ed slipped through behind them, slamming the door after him.

They were back in the courtyard, running for the bridge. As they crossed the water, Paul's armour began to turn purple, flushing from the feet upwards.

He looked around uncertainly. "What ha- Did I - I don't -"

"Don't worry about it." Ed told him. "Let's just get out of here."

The horses were still waiting on the bank. The three knights mounted up and rode off, not turning to look as the castle silently disappeared and its owner watched them go.

"Not long now." he said. "Not long."

Chapter Eight: Winged Assassins

The three knights rode on in silence, too shocked to talk about their experiences. There was a cold wind blowing through the forest as they headed north.

"How far to the coast?" Straker asked eventually.

Alec looked at the sky. "I do not think we will be there by nightfall."

Again there was silence. Even the horses seemed dispirited as they trudged along. The trees were turning back to the dark conifers they had seen around the troll's home. Here, however, they were thinning out.

Straker dropped his gaze to the ground. He was so weary and he still had no idea of what it was he was searching for. Was he on a quest at all? Was this anything more than a mad nightmare? Perhaps he should have asked Jackson more questions. Not that he would have understood the answers.

The attack came from above and behind, just as they left the shelter of the trees. Straker heard an ululating wail, an organic version of the UFOs' engine noise, and felt a rush of air behind him. That gave him a fraction of a second to duck out of the way. Something swept over him, raking the back of his armour.

He spurred his horse into the air, trying to get a good look at what it was they were fighting. At the same time he unhooked his lance.

It was the aliens, of course, the Silent Ones as they were known here. They wore red armour with green, opaque visors. They rode winged horses similar to those of the knights but silver in colour and more blocky and brutal in their appearance. There were six of the aliens opposing the three knights.

The alien that had attacked Straker was wheeling around. Another behind him was drawing his sword. Alec was airborne, laying into two attackers who blocked him in from either side. Paul was trapped on the ground by the last two as they circled above him.

Looking front and back, Straker decided to take out the one that was still side on to him after its charge. He had his sword arm towards Straker, his shield away.

Ed looked for a chink in his armour. Nothing much, just a seam. Not exactly a broad target but he had to move now.

He urged his charger forward. The creature galloped through the air. The lance impacted the armour, burst the seam, shattered. The alien dropped his sword, flailing. Green fluid oozed from the torn metal, darker and thicker than the fluid they used for breathing. Blood? Straker had no time to think about that.

He hurled the remains of the lance at one of the Silent Ones menacing Paul. He did not wait to see if it did any damage.

He drew Shadow. The lightning blade flashed. Time seemed to stand still for moment. The alien flinched.

Straker wheeled the horse round, squaring up to his second opponent. Both were brandishing their swords, sizing the other up.

The alien feinted. Straker parried, then brought his blade round to swing it at the red and green helmet.

The alien ducked forwards. The point of his blade came up by the side of his mount almost before Straker saw it.

He changed the course of his stroke, bringing it forward to parry the blow. He brought SHADO down through the alien's wrist then swung up to behead him.

The mailed hand and head plummeted towards the ground.

Straker's horse reared under him, whinnying in pain. The man fought to keep his seat. Then he realised there was no point. The animal's wings were not moving. The blow had caught it in the stomach. It was dying. It could not stay in the air much longer.

Straker reached back, grabbing the bridle of the horse - still with its rider - behind him. He slipped out of his stirrups and hung on like grim death as his mount fell away.

Now he was hanging from an enemy's bucking mount as another bounded towards him. He realised there were too many of them, that reinforcements must have come while he was too occupied to see them.

Next to impossible, he thought as he brought Shadow up into the belly of the approaching attacker's mount, mirroring his own downfall. The poor creature screamed in pain. Uncontrollable, it reared away.

A sword clanged across Straker's shoulder from the rider of the horse he was clinging on to. He attempted to twist, strike upwards. It was hard to move at all, let alone move fast enough, and he could not reach. All the joints of his arm screamed with pain as the armour weighed him down.

Another one was coming up from below. He struck out, knocking Shadow from Straker's grasp.

That was when he knew it was over.

Both of the uninjured Silent Ones took hold of one of his wrists, dangling him between them as they rode off with their prize. He caught a brief glimpse of Alec attempting to follow before he had to turn back and defend himself.

Straker watched the countryside pass beneath him as it grew dark. In the far distance he could see the sea coast, feel the breeze stronger. He took in all the details because they might be useful and to take his mind off his discomfort. It was not quite so bad as when he had hung from the bridle. The way they held him, more of the stress was on the armour. His feet were planted firmly on the iron soles of his boots. But enough was on his body to make him wish fervently that they would land.

They did, eventually. It was too dark by now to see much detail of the castle as he was set down within its walls. It was big, enormous to his tired eyes, and dark. Though it was visible from miles away, he had been able see little else about it.

More of the aliens approached and in minutes he was stripped of his armour. Then he was dragged towards a grating in the middle of the main courtyard. It was pulled open and he had a moment to look down into the darkness, down and down.

Oubliette. He was not sure where he dragged up that word from but he knew what it meant. A dungeon where you put someone and forgot about them.

A hand pushed him in the middle of the back and he fell forwards.

Chapter Nine: The Oublette

Straker sat sprawled against the wall at the bottom of the pit. The padded clothing needed under his armour had broken his fall - he guessed that was what his captors had wanted - but he was bruised and winded and in considerable pain. He dug his fingers into the packed earth and screwed his eyes shut.

He was trapped, trapped at the bottom of a stinking hole and his claustrophobia was running riot. He had to think his way out of this one.

He looked up. It was hard tell distance in the semi-darkness but the iron grill seemed an awful long way above him. The walls of the pit were close enough that he could - with luck and a great deal of patience - chimney his way to the top but for the moment he could see no reason to. Even if the grill was not locked and not too heavy for him to lift, it would merely bring him out in the main courtyard of the enemy castle. Perhaps when it got dark -

His thoughts took an abrupt change of direction. When it was dark the Moon would rise. What had the Maidens said?

"If you can see the Moon, we can see you."

That, surely, was his salvation. And yet he could see such a tiny patch of sky from where he was. Could they possibly see him? He would have to improve his chances. If he climbed to the top of the shaft, the likelihood of being spotted was much greater.

He was testing his feet against the far wall when he realised that the likelihood of being spotted by the Silent Ones was much greater also. He would have to time this right, make sure he hit the top when the Moon was overhead. That was a hard calculation because he knew neither how long it would take him to ascend nor when the Moon would rise. It was all guesswork.

He made himself wait until the last dregs of colour were draining from the sky. Then he braced his feet against one wall and his back and arms against the other.

He was unsure whether it was better to shuffle his way up or to take more jerky steps. He tried both and both were equally hard work. The necessity to keep almost every muscle in his body in a state of constant tension was exhausting. Even his jaw and his forehead seemed tense.

He inched his way, not looking up or down but only staring at his feet. At one point he took a foot away from the wall to move it farther up but the muscles in his other leg shivered uncontrollably and he slammed it back into place. After that he only shuffled.

Slightly higher, the earth was not so well packed and crumbled away at his back, leaving him scrabbling for grip. He heaved himself up, faster than was safe, past that point.

The only light now was the pale, silver glint of the Moon. He hoped they could already see him but he knew he had to make it the top and stay there to give them the best possible chance of spotting him. He pressed on.

It was only when his head bumped against the grill that he realised he had made it. He allowed a smile to touch his lips. His screaming muscles would have to chimney down again if he was to make it in safety but he had made it. For now, though, he needed to decide what to do to make himself as visible as possible without alerting the attention of his captors. With his back jammed up against the wall, he doubted he could be clearly seen.

He *might* be able to shift the grill.

If I've come this far, I might as well try it.

He eased one hand away from the wall, bracing his back a little more firmly, and raised it

to a metal cross piece. He pushed. Nothing happened. He pushed harder. Was it giving a little?

He raised his other arm, carefully. His legs trembled with effort but he needed to know. Both hands now grasped the bars and he looked up to see the full Moon above him. The Man in the Moon was smiling at him. He hoped the Maidens were too. They must have seen him. They must know where he was.

He sighed with relief, clinging on a little longer to be sure - and unsure what to do next. He pushed at the bars once again. He thought he felt a little give.

There was a dark figure between himself and the Moon but he did not see it until the mailed boot came down across his knuckles.

He yelled, his muscles jerking and his feet dropping. He clung on to the grill. The foot came down again. He was ready for it but there was nowhere for his hands to go. He simply clung on despite the pain. He could either let his hands be broken or drop to the bottom of the pit.

It was not a choice, because when his hands broke he would drop. He let go. He plummeted. He bent his knees and braced himself but he hit hard. He passed out.

When he came round, sunlight was touching the top of the shaft. No more Moon. Had they seen him? He did not know. He lay back, trying to think. Trying to forget the pain.

It was quiet above him. The Silent Ones really were silent. He could hear no voices. He wondered if they would toss him any scraps to keep him going a little longer. He was not sure he wanted to keep going but hunger and claustrophobia were tying his stomach in knots.

He waited, listening, hoping the sunlight would hit him but doubting it would penetrate this far.

There was a noise. Noises. Shouts. Horses' hooves, the beat of wings. The clash of swords. They were coming for him.

He had to think clearly. He had to do what he could to help them. They should not have come. He must not hold them up.

He straightened himself out, braced his back and his feet and began once more to chimney his way to the top.

Chapter Ten: Straker's Grail

Straker chimneyed his way back to the top of the oubliette, his muscles shaking with effort. He was by no means sure he would make it this time but by now he could hear fighting in the courtyard and he wanted to be there. Swords clashed, men cried out, flames cracked and lightning thundered as if someone was using it as their weapon.

The enchanter, Jackson, was he there?

When the White Knight looked up to gauge the distance, he could see that the grating which trapped him had been lifted. He would reach the top in a few moments, almost as if someone had been pulling him up. Now he was aware of it, he could feel the tug as he slid smoothly up the last few feet.

At the top, the Lady of the Lake gave him her hand and he stepped safely onto the cobbles. The reaction to his claustrophobia, besides his extreme fatigue, made him tremble but he pulled himself together. All around him his rescuers were engaged in combat with the Silent Ones. Alec was holding off three who had pinned him against the wall. Paul Foster managed to decapitate one, green fluid spurting high, before another charged him from behind. The enchanter was indeed raining down lightning bolts to demolish the walls of the castle. Even Keith Ford was holding his own from a tower with a bow and arrow. And far in the distance he could see the female warriors of the Castle of Ladies winging in on their flying steeds.

He turned to Colonel Lake. "I need to help them. I'm sorry, I lost the weapons you gave me. I lost Shadow."

The words hit home now. Lost Shadow. Yet SHADO was around him.

The Lady smiled. From somewhere he did not see she produced his magic blade of light. "Shadow is not yet lost."

He took it gratefully. Alec was in trouble and their reinforcements were still several minutes away.

But she was still speaking. "There are better ways to help them. Will you not complete the quest?"

He looked around, aware now that his people were outnumbered, that they were losing. That they had known it would be this way before they came for him. His instinct was to dash forward, strike out with his sword. But no, the Lady was right. That would do no good.

"What must I do?" he asked.

"Turn your back on them and go through the door. The gatekeeper will take you the last part of the way."

Torn, he looked at her. "Which door?"

But he already knew.

It was small, made of three planks with iron straps and a ring for a handle. It was arched in shape, barely noticeable at the base of the wall.

As he stepped towards it, Alec cried out. Straker half turned. Freeman was moments from death, a sword at his throat and another at his belly. He was looking directly into Ed's eyes.

Straker steeled himself and ran for the door, throwing it open without effort.

The gatekeeper was Miss Ealand, of course. Except she was Miss Ealand, dressed in the fashion of 1980 and sat behind the desk in her own office.

She looked up and smiled at him. "I believe you'll find it in the medical centre, sir."

Back through the door he could still hear the cries. The Lady was on the threshold. On impulse, he pulled her through.

In an instant she was Virginia Lake once more, confused and looking about her. "Ed?"

At the edge of his hearing someone was groaning, as if they were returning with difficulty to consciousness.

He was not sure if he could return to the castle but he knew he had to. He realised he was dressed in his familiar Nehru suit but as he stepped back through the door, he was once more in armour and holding Shadow.

It was a hard fight, through the press of aliens surrounding Alec. He was still exhausted but his mind was clear now.

"To me!" he called. "To me!"

And they came, all of them, he could not see how many. He directed them as a body to rescue his second in command. Alec lay half slumped on the ground, bleeding. Jackson used his magic to levitate him, drawing him to them.

"You couldn't have done that earlier?" Straker asked.

"No." Jackson replied.

They pulled back, the aliens pressing them hard.

"Through the door." Straker shouted. "Hurry."

One by one they tumbled through, people who had not been there, could not be there. Straker did not know or care, he simply wanted to get his people out of there. And as they fell into the real world, they reverted to their normal selves.

At last it was his turn. He collapsed to the floor of his office, feet still sticking through the door until he pulled them back. He did not care about anything else. It was over. They were home.

Then the office began to ripple around him.

He had no energy left to do anything except sigh and wait. He could still hear the moaning around him and realised that one of the voices was his own.

Ginny Lake was saying: "They're going to have a terrible headache when they wake up. I know I have."

Straker came to in an overcrowded ward of SHADO's Medical Centre. All around him his officers were coming back to life. Ginny Lake was sitting on her bed, leaning on the cabinet and attempting to stand.

He stared at the ceiling and spoke to no one in particular: "Don't tell me that was all a dream."

Alec's voice, next to him, was hoarse. "I was dreaming. Big one. I was some medieval knight. Had a castle filled with -"

Ed stared at him. "Women?"

Freeman grinned. "Not a difficult guess."

"But then it was attacked by a dragon? And we rode off on flying horses and ran into Paul?"

"Yeah." Alec looked at him warily.

"I'm over here." Foster said. "We jousting. I - er - I fell off."

"I had this great palace." said Lake. "Underwater, appropriately enough."

Straker frowned deeper and deeper. It seemed it had all been real - in a manner of speaking. Each affected member of SHADO remembered the dream from their own perspective but where it intersected with Straker's, they coincided exactly.

He sighed. "Ginny, find out the hows and whys. Alec, check out there's no lasting damage to our people."

Alec had been frowning for a while. "You don't think... You don't think there were aliens dreaming, too?"

"I have no idea. I'm going to check they didn't leave us any more little surprises. Seems like half the staff have been out of commission. And we'd better check on Moonbase."

Keith Ford wandered past, a dazed expression on his face. "Sir, this is reality, isn't it?"

"And you can check on General Henderson." Ed told him.

The communications chief's face fell and Straker assumed he was remembering a certain troll.

Epilogue

Straker felt like he was just coming out of a bad dose of the flu. He did not say that to his staff but then again, he did not need to. Half of them had been through the same... He thought the word *ordeal*, then stopped himself. In a curious way he had rather enjoyed it.

They had just managed to get through to both Moonbase and SkyDiver. The crews there were suffering the same, relatively mild, after effects. It would be a day or two before everyone was up to par so they needed to be careful. He was resting people wherever possible.

His intercom buzzed. It was Ayesha.

"I have Lieutenant Ford on the line, sire. I mean *sir*. Shall I put him through?"

"Do that."

Ford would be reporting back on General Henderson, the only person outside SHADO itself that Straker had seen in the fantasy world. At least, he assumed the illusions that the enchanter had shown him had simply been illusions, not affecting the real people. He did feel a little guilty about sending Ford, now that he understood that each one had been their alternates. Ford had done a good job in his other persona and Henderson was likely to be in a worse mood than ever.

The young man was his usual hesitant self. "The General's staff report he's been confined to bed with a virus, sir. I didn't manage to speak to the general himself. I'll try -"

"Don't bother." Straker realised he was still snapping and softened his tone slightly. "Go get some rest, Lieutenant. When are you due on duty next?"

"Tomorrow morning, sir."

"Fine. Till then - I guess you could do with sleeping it off."

A relieved sounding Ford signed off and Straker left it at that. If the old man did not want their help, that was his problem. They had plenty of other things to do. Straker would see that he received a full report on the matter. If that did not provoke a response, he would not bother him further.

Of course there were other dreamers outside SHADO who were a far bigger problem. How had the aliens managed it this time? They had pulled off some weird and spectacular coups in the past but this was the first time they had managed to infiltrate the minds of most of SHADO - to the point where Straker was not entirely sure he had woken up.

How had the aliens infected them? Through himself? Another member of SHADO? Some kind of broadcast? Something they had never encountered before? Whatever else he thought of them, he had to admit the Silent Ones were ingenious.

On his desk were the reports of every UFO that had got through in the last six months and every suspicious incident for a year. Perhaps there was some clue as to what they had done, where they had done it from.

The door opened and Alec slouched in. "I haven't had a hangover this bad since... No, don't want to go there. But I have to say, that was more fun than most of what they throw at us."

Ed looked up at him from the desk. "What if it wasn't them? What if someone else threw it at us and them?"

Alec's face was a picture. "You're not serious? Somebody else? I suppose that means we won."

"No, I'm not. Serious. Or sure that we won." But now he had said it he could not get it out of his head.

The two of them sat down to brainstorm over the reports. Several cups of coffee later they had thrown away the majority and narrowed it down to three possibilities. One of those involved Straker reluctantly sending Paul Foster to an altogether too happy Jackson for debriefing.

"They wouldn't go after him again, would they?" Alec asked.

Ed shrugged. "He didn't seem to be at the centre of it but that doesn't necessarily mean it didn't start through him. He has an hour missing."

Alec shrugged. "An hour's not long."

"No, it isn't. And I hope to God we don't have to go through what we did last time."

The second possibility involved sending two Mobiles and SkyDiver to see if they could triangulate a signal from somewhere in or just off the Wash. As with Foster's interrogation, all the rest of SHADO could do was sit and wait.

"I could go up to East Anglia," Alec said.

"Later, if they find anything."

"Alright, how about the third one?"

Ed looked at him. "I'm taking the third one."

Alec grinned. "You think that's it. Toss you for it?"

"Alec."

"Race you to the car for it?"

"Alec."

"Go on."

Ed sighed. "Why are you bored?"

Alec slumped in his chair. "Because I'm just coming down off a mammoth high. You know, maybe you're right. The aliens have never given us anything that was that much fun."

"You weren't enjoying it so much at the time."

Alec shrugged. "I had a nice castle."

Ed shook his head ruefully. "More a case of who was in the castle, I'd guess. But one of us needs to stay here. And it isn't going to be me."

He looked back as he walked out and saw Alec pulling a face at him. He was tempted to pull one back but the door opened and there were people outside.

He drove himself the twenty minutes to the site, followed closely by two vans containing a security team. Here, above a small wood surrounded by farmland, a UFO had exploded three months ago.

With the wood in sight, Straker drove through village. On the outskirts he passed an octagonal toll cottage he had noted after the previous incident, a pretty little thing in the kind of gothick you spelt with a K. It had been well-kept then, the garden an impressive display of colour. There was colour still but now the whole place was rank and overgrown.

He pulled onto the grass verge at the side of the road. The vans squealed to a halt behind him, carving tyre tracks into the wet ground. As the team stepped out he met them.

"Two of you come with me. The rest of you go on and check out the wood."

The men nodded, most getting back into the vans and driving off. Straker crossed the road, opened the gate and walked up the weed-infested path to the front door.

"Check out the back," he said. "Five minutes."

His two followers moved off. With his hand on the butt of his gun, Straker looked at the windows. All had the curtains drawn but the second one to his right showed just a crack between the material. He moved across and put his eye to it. It was dark inside, only

illuminated by the sliver of sunlight that he was now partially blocking. He moved back to the door, waiting quietly. At exactly five minutes he rang the doorbell. As he expected, there was no answer. He tried the handle. The door was locked. After a moment's consideration, he kicked it in.

It was as dark as he expected inside and it stank. There was no sign of movement except for the pile of post which continued to avalanche down now that the door had moved it. He flicked the light switches but nothing happened. Once his eyes had adjusted, he continued on his way.

The hall had three doors coming off it. He opened the one to his right. The three men lay on the floor surrounded by electronic equipment and life support gear. They were deeply unconscious. Hair and nails were long. Straker checked the other rooms. There was no one else.

Later, when it was all cleared up, he met with Freeman, Lake and Jackson.

"It is unlikely they will ever awake." Jackson said.

"And the aliens are dreaming through them?" Alec asked.

"It appears so. Most fascinating."

Alec's lower lip stuck out. "I wish you joy of it. And them too."

Straker shook his head. "I doubt if there's enough of their own minds left to experience joy or anything else. A living death twice over. Colonel Lake, do you have anything for us?"

Lake nodded slowly. "The machinery, or what we can understand of it, mostly broadcasts ... their thoughts I suppose. There's no obvious input into their brains. I suppose that must have been completed, not an ongoing process."

And that, as ever, was about as far as they got. Part of the answer, Straker thought, never the whole thing.

But they had won, this time. At least he thought they had.